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A Unified Theological Approach to the Issue of Abortion

Brandon Hendricks[1]

Abstract: There are two traditional binary ends of the spectrum that exist within the polarized secular discussion surrounding the issue of abortion. On one end, there are proponents of the position that a woman has unrestricted authority to choose to terminate a pregnancy. Conversely, on the other end of the spectrum, there are proponents of the position that each and every child maintains a fundamental right to live, and consequently, the state has a vested interest in preserving this right. The goal of this manuscript is to attempt to examine secular as well as theological considerations of both ends of the spectrum on abortion, before seeking to offer a mutual consensus based in Christian ethics, as supported by scripture, through examination of the ethical considerations of the pro-choice argument, examination of the ethical considerations of the pro-life argument, and ultimately, positing a common-ground alternative to this contentious issue by seeking to transcend the binary nature of the argument, and rather, focus on the mutual interests found in an ecumenical theological approach.
Keywords: Christian bioethics, abortion, political theology, practical theology, ecumenism, religious pragmatism

Introduction

At the center of contemporary societal discourse on the issue of abortion is the dialectical tension that exists between the sanctity of life and bodily autonomy, with far-reaching ethical implications related to cultural, political, and theological matters. Contemporarily, the mainstream discussion around this issue is traditionally presented at the secular level of society as two binary ends

[1] Brandon A. Hendricks is a ThM student at Duke University Divinity School, where his research focuses on the intersection of classical philosophy and doctrinal expressions of the Christian faith. He earned his M.Div. with distinction in Historical and Theological Studies from Campbell University Divinity School and holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In addition to his academic work, he has served as a Senior Pastor, a U.S. Army Chaplain, and held leadership roles in national 501(c)(3) student activist organizations. Contact E-mail: bahendricks1220@email.campbell.edu

on a spectrum. On one end, there are proponents of the position that a mother has unrestricted authority to choose to terminate her pregnancy. This group attempts to leverage the ethical considerations of bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, and a history of inequitable gender dynamics. Conversely, on the other end of the spectrum, there are proponents of the position that each and every unborn baby maintains a fundamental right to live. This group attempts to leverage the ethical considerations of the sanctity of life, societal degradation, and the long-term physiological and psychological health implications for the mother. This is the mainstream binary secular argument that society has been presented with. It has resulted in contentious debates that permeate the airwaves of mainstream media, but it is also one that transcends the secular paradigm and has deep theological considerations that must be examined.

Within the context of theological discourse, it is imperative that the Church examines the issue of abortion through the lens of faith and equity, while still accounting for scientific advancement and revelations within the realm of anatomy, psychology, and bioethics. Running concurrently with these positive advancements in the sciences is a negative ethical devolution that is taking place within society that can be correlatively observed with contemporary philosophical trends (Mintzberg 2015, 71-72). Some have argued that the present-day shift toward secular humanism is not only correlative but also serves among the many causal forces leading to this further degradation of society through a culture of egoism that continues to lead people away from Christ and toward self-centric behavioral patterns (Delkeskamp-Hayes and Imrényi 2013, 238). While there is certainly room to question the intricacies of this assertion, these very patterns of observable self-centered behavior in contemporary society are markedly antithetical to the Christian ethic and often prevent one from asking difficult questions that might inspire introspection of one's base assumptions. As truth-seeking Christians, it is imperative to pursue introspection through intellectual honesty as these issues are examined, so as to potentially eliminate developments that might lead one towards ideological inconsistencies. This noble path necessitates a deeper dive into many of these difficult questions at the center of this discussion surrounding personhood: "When does human life start? Is abortion harmful to the aborted? Is it murder? When does human life have full moral status as a human being – or any moral status at all? What, if anything, does being a person have to do with it? How are we justly to resolve conflicts of interest?" (Johnson 2011, 238)

This discussion into the intricacies of personhood, however, is only one side of the equation. One cannot seek to fixate on the answers to these questions and ignore the backdrop of historical inequities faced by women as it relates to this issue. In order to equitably consider the full spectrum of intricacies related to the issue of abortion, one must examine it through an egalitarian lens that does not

subjugate the interests of one party at the expense of the other (Stensvold 2015, 172-173). This includes a nuanced examination of mother-baby relations as well as historically inequitable gender relations. In fact, it is even more important to carefully consider the balance of this discussion given the historical inequities women have experienced even within the realm of Christian faith communities (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016, 217). The vast layers of complexity here cannot be overstated. It is for this reason that one must seek to transcend the tendency to allow one's bias about these very issues to lead to heated exchanges devolving into emotive *ad hominem* as opposed to sincere ethical discourse seeking to earnestly deduce truthful revelation.

As a truth-seeking Christian, one must be able to transcend the purely secular conversation and consider the existential implications pertinent to the principles of faith, while still understanding that the Church body lives within a pluralistic culture with modern scientific revelation. Therefore, it would be irresponsible to completely remove theological examination from the equation of bioethical consideration, given that it would eliminate the capacity of the truth-seeking Christian to differentiate between the fullness of one's informed judgement about this issue from secular cultural and sociohistorical bias (Cherry 2011, 25-46). This is even more important considering that Christianity is not only a faith but also a worldview that is the epicenter of formation from which the Christian perspective unfolds (Lewis 1962, 164-165). It is therefore requisite that the truth-seeking Christian direct these kinds of previously noted questions through the aperture of a theological lens while still giving credence to scientific revelation and pragmatic realities. Dr. Johnson attempts to integrate these considerations as he outlines a good starting point to begin the conversation about life through the following theological hermeneutic:

> "Life comes from life before it… Every child, every embryo, every adult started from a microscopic living cell, a zygote. But life did not start there. The zygote was formed from a living ovum and a living sperm cell, each of which formed as part of, then separated from, other living beings (the parents) – and so on back… human life comes from previous human life, all the way back to the Creation" (Johnson 2011, 238)

At which point is life considered distinctly and uniquely human? Is life more fluid than is often presumed? To what degree should all life be viewed as symbiotic?

Certainly, these kinds of inquiries seek to address the root of what must be considered within the subject of abortion. Yet, these questions must likewise be levied through the theo-ethical lens of the mother as part of the *imago Dei*. One

cannot simply focus on the life of the unborn baby while ignoring the rights and value of pregnant mothers (Colker 1992, 86). Nor should such discussions lead to a place that seeks to circumvent acknowledgment of the divinely granted agency of a woman to make autonomous decisions. To do so would be to fail to weigh the intricacies of this discussion equitably, and would thereby undermine any attempt to come to mutual consensus, as a result of failing to acknowledge the argument that women's experiences have historically been "displaced from consideration, devalued as the excluded term by reference to which what is good is defined, and rendered mute by increasingly authoritarian proclamations that to be human means what the man says (Parsons 1996, 64)."

Thus far, the interests of mothers and unborn babies have been presented as adversarial in relationship. Despite the historical secular tendency to do so, the interests between these parties do not have to be viewed as mutually exclusive (Colker 1992, 86). Therefore, it is the goal of this manuscript to attempt to analyze secular as well as theological considerations of both polarized ends of the spectrum on abortion, before seeking to offer a mutual consensus based in Christian ethics, as supported by scripture, through the following movements: (1) Examine the ethical considerations of the pro-choice argument; (2) Examine the ethical considerations of the pro-life argument; and (3) Offer a common-sense alternative to the discussion surrounding the issue of abortion by seeking to transcend the binary nature of the argument, and rather, focus on a solutions-based approach grounded in Christian ethics.

Such an endeavor can only be sought if one is willing to pursue it through a sincere effort to cast aside one's bias in a spirit of charity, with the desire to discover a potential solutions-focused consensus. At a time when division is as high as it is, this manuscript posits that such an effort is worth pursuing and seeks to identify the beginning stages of a position upon which the Church can collectively coalesce.

Examining the Ethical Considerations of the Pro-Choice Argument

At the nexus of secular ethical consideration within the mainstream pro-choice argument is the belief that it is necessary to reconceptualize discussions around these issues through feminist consideration of the historical inequity within gender dynamics, and affirm a woman's fundamental right to assume reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. As it relates specifically to feminist considerations, the secular pro-choice argument suggests that predicating the entirety of this discussion within a rights centric paradigm is insufficient given that historically such an approach "entails reliance on a masculine construction of the rights-bearing individual (Smyth 2002)." Nevertheless, the construction

"of 'a woman's right to choose' as the main principle of reproductive freedom is insufficient and problematic at the same time as it is politically compelling (Pollack Petchesky 1986, 6-7)." Therefore, it is important to specify that the secular pro-choice argument suggests that the consideration of 'rights' is only a portion of the discussion that must likewise include consideration of the historical disenfranchisement of female agency and minimization of female experiences within traditional gender dynamics.

Nevertheless, the examination of rights is absolutely necessary to fully articulate the secular pro-choice argument that assumes a women's right to reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. In fact, these rights-based considerations are foundational to supporting the argument that a mother should justifiably be able to terminate a pregnancy based on an ethical rationale that can most succinctly be articulated through the concept of the non-aggression principle. This principle posits that aggressive action taken against a person, or property of a person, is a morally reprehensible act that reasonably permits the individual experiencing the aggression to rightfully claim self-defense (Zwolinski 2016, 62-90). In the case of the secular pro-choice argument, the unborn baby's act of utilizing the mother's bodily resources without her consent provides the basis for claims of self-defense of the mother's personhood, which has been arguably infringed upon by the unborn baby; thereby, limiting the mother's ability to have authority over her own reproductive system and fully experience liberty through unadulterated bodily autonomy.

Moreover, even pro-life apologists have had to contend with the secular pro-choice argument that even if the unborn baby has the same right to life as the mother, abortion should be considered morally permissible based on the belief that it is a form of indirect killing that results from the refusal to provide life support through one's own body (Horn 2018, 435-442). Essentially, the secular pro-choice argument posits that the unborn baby's right to life cannot be utilized as a form of reasoning to force the mother to provide life support through her bodily resources, especially considering the mother bears certain financial and potential physiological risks. While there is much to be discussed surrounding the intricacies of how indirect the termination really is, the secular pro-choice argument reasonably contends that one cannot simply ignore the evidence that there are certain financial and potential physiological risks being forced upon the mother as she provides life support through her own body, potentially against her will.

The basis of this framework, rooted in the values of individual sovereignty and the non-aggression principle, are not merely limited to the secular paradigm. As can be seen documented in scripture, God has granted each individual the freedom to make decisions, even when many of humanity's decisions have led to controversial outcomes. For the sake of weighing a fuller spectrum of

thought beyond merely the secular paradigm, it is requisite that the potential theological considerations that might be used in support of the pro-choice argument are examined. In doing so, it is beneficial to first look back at the mosaic of traditional Christian thought, and subsequently, examine the modern perspective of contemporary pro-choice theological consideration.

Historically, arguments surrounding the proposition of the delayed animative state of the unborn baby have been leveraged as a theological consideration within the discussion of abortion (Jones 2013, 97-124). However, this argument is considered by modern science to be antiquated with advancements in medical technology showing an animated state early during the germinal stage (Crawford 2020, 32-41). Yet, there is a breadth of contemporary theological assertions that have been made on behalf of the pro-choice argument that hold the potential of fundamentally reframing the theological intricacies to be considered in this discussion.

One such example attempts to do so by examining the theological significance related to the difficult circumstances and societal pressures that impact a mother, specifically for those who are poor and a product of lower-class struggle (Cooper 2016, 226-44). Women in these disenfranchised positions have historically been deprived their right of agency by societal paradigms and power structures. The pro-choice theological argument suggests that this does not synergize with the gospel message, which regularly depicts how agency is synonymous with the biblical narrative, as even Mary was not forced to bear the Messiah but was someone who chose to cooperate in the divine redemption of humanity by walking in willful obedience (Kamitsuka 2018, 41-57). While she submitted to the will of God by continuing with pregnancy, even this was still a choice she decided to make as evidenced by Luke 1:38, where the angel Gabriel remained with her until her consent had been given. Surely, one can speculate if any alternative response from Mary would have shifted this movement of God. Nevertheless, the pro-choice theological argument suggests that her agency was not disregarded as an irrelevant factor in this divine miracle.

Moreover, the pro-choice theological argument would suggest that the intent of actions must be examined when weighing the theological intricacies of this discussion, given that it has been leveraged for this very purpose when examining the intricacies of sin (Cooper 2006, 123-124). As it relates specifically to abortion, the argument posits that "what is important is whether the 'killing is brought about as an end sought or as a chosen means—in other words whether it is the object (McCruden 2012, 305).'" For instance, if death is not the desired end of obtaining bodily autonomy, in what sense could such an abortion be considered murder? While this argument seems to primarily hold relevance for abortions that occur up until the point of viability, it could be contended that the inclusion of intent has paradigm shifting potential as an overarching point

of consideration, given that it not only holds precedence under secular law but also as a significant point of consideration within traditional Christian thought by some of the greatest intellectual giants in the history of theology (Aquinas 1920).

Examining the Ethical Considerations of the Pro-Life Argument

At the nexus of secular ethical consideration within the mainstream pro-life argument is the belief that upholding an unborn baby's right to life is in the collective best interest of the unborn baby, the mother, and society. Outside of a circumstance that would detrimentally put the mother's health at risk by continuing the pregnancy, the secular pro-life argument would suggest that these three parties are indeed collectively best served by upholding the sanctity of life as a preeminent virtue. As it relates to the first specified party, it is believed that each unborn baby should enjoy the same right to life as any other human being. This right to life is based on long-standing secular and theological principles recognized over the course of human history in cultural practice, religious texts, and common law across nearly all societal structures (Tomuschat, Lagrange and Oeter 2010, 3-18). In fact, this right to life has been both historically and theologically regarded as holding special consideration as a societal value, even above other rights and freedoms enjoyed by sovereign individuals (Tomuschat, Lagrange and Oeter 2010, 3-4). Therefore, the pro-life argument would suggest that attempting to ignore this right is an attempt to ignore the foundation of human rights.

In the case of specifying the interests for the second identified party of the mother, the approach of the secular pro-life argument necessarily attempts to leverage an intricate degree of nuance as it attempts to outline a complex assertion. The foundation of this secular pro-life argument is based on the premise that mothers can often exhibit enduring psychological, emotional, spiritual, and interpersonal complications following the termination of their unborn baby, including symptoms of depression, grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Whitney, 2017, 98-105). It is important to note, however, that there has also been other research that has yielded mixed results (Reardon, 2018). Nevertheless, the British Journal of Psychiatry analyzed the data on 877,000 women and noted that those who had received an abortion were 37% more likely to experience depression, 34% more likely to develop an anxiety disorder, 110% more likely to abuse alcohol, and 155% more likely to commit suicide (Coleman 2011, 180-186). These are compounded by considerations related to potential permanent physiological damage of the mother's health and reproductive system, even if these are relatively minimal in occurrence (Upadhyay et al. 2015, 175-183).

Finally, in the case of examining the best interest of the last party, the secular pro-life argument would suggest that society likewise endures notable detrimental consequences from the practice of abortion. The secular pro-life argument maintains that, contemporarily, there has been a cultural transition in society from one that once reluctantly permitted abortion into one that now seemingly welcomes it to such an extent that it is now the most common surgical procedure performed on young women, contributing to the further perversion of it by treating abortion as a form of regular birth control (Hogan 2013, 185-197). This disregard for life, as the secular pro-life argument suggests, has only further perpetuated the devolution of society. It can be speculated that an attempt to eliminate abortion would put a greater undue burden on society than the prevalent problems experienced under current circumstances. Yet, the secular pro-life argument would point to the proposition that history purports that assumptions of these kind might be baseless (Marshall 2021, 30).

With that being said, it is difficult to deny that the core tenet of many pro-life ethical considerations – beyond those that weigh the consequences for the mother and society – are predicated upon the prospect of the unborn being regarded as a human life. Certainly, from a biological perspective, every cell of the unborn is materially human. Yet, whether or not the unborn is to be considered functionally human is the point upon which the argument is met with contention. It may indeed be impossible for secular society to come to a concrete consensus for the identification of what constitutes personhood. However, in the face of such debatable ambiguity, the pro-life argument suggests that it would be an ethically worse proposition to deny the status of personhood to an actual person than to attribute personhood to a non-person (Mühling and Gilland, 2013, 473- 486). This consideration draws upon the historical precedence of this argument being leveraged to unjustly deny personhood by some of the most insidious movements the world has ever seen, and as such, challenges one to consider the ethical dangers of such a proposition.

Moreover, for the same reason that it was necessary to examine the ethical considerations of the pro-choice argument through a theological perspective to provide a more complete picture of this discussion, it is likewise essential to examine the ethical considerations of the pro-life argument beyond merely the secular paradigm. Like the theological assertions made by the pro-choice argument, the theological pro-life argument seeks to draw upon scripture as evidence in support of pro-life considerations. This includes citation of passages like Exodus 21:22-25 and Jeremiah 1:4-5 (Jones and Molinari 2018). In the case of the latter example, the theological pro-life argument contends that since God had preordained plans for Jeremiah as a prophet, his personhood was recognized when it was told to him that "before you were born I consecrated you." This language is suggested to be informing the notion that God recognized Jeremiah

well before the moment of his birth, with plans for him as someone possessing inherent personhood.

Ironically, like the theological pro-choice argument, the theological pro-life argument similarly draws upon the virgin birth as evidence of its assertion, by pointing to the fact that there would be "enormous Christological problems that arise if one assumes that the pre-born are not persons, not truly human. If none of us are persons before birth, then that means that, for nine months, the being contained in the Virgin's womb is fully God and fully something else, but not human (Damick 2012)." The pro-life argument suggests that the gravity of this dilemma would fundamentally shift Christian orthodoxy and undermine many of the central tenets of the faith. These theological concerns are only exacerbated by the pro-life assertion that, at its best, the pro-life argument is capable of displaying loving consideration for both parties, while even at its best, the pro-choice argument is only capable of displaying loving consideration for one party, which consequently, makes it an ethically worse proposition based on the foundational Christian virtue of love.

A Common Ground Alternative to the Issue of Abortion

It would be careless to not recognize that professing Christians draw conclusions from all over the ideological spectrum on the issue of abortion, often correlated with the inspirational sources from which they believe to hold most hierarchal divine authority (Uecker and Froese 2019, 283-316). Interestingly though, the morality of abortion is contested even between Christians of similar cultural and denominational backgrounds, who seek to leverage both biblical and theological arguments in support of their stances (Jones and Molinari 2018). In some cases, as is evidenced by earlier examples, these very same sources of inspiration can be utilized to draw staunchly antithetical conclusions. This is because people often have an unconscious tendency to congregate in intellectually harmonious echo chambers that perpetuate their preconceived base assumptions and severely hinder their capacity to honestly consider alternative perspectives (Vicario et al. 2016). This problem unfortunately affects society at both the secular and religious levels. Moreover, it severely limits the capacity of truth-seeking Christians to have an honest conversation about abortion.

Any attempt to settle the disagreement between the two polarized arguments outlined in this manuscript, through sincere theological discussion, would be a futile endeavor in a contemporary environment where the significance placed on one's political ideology is often pedestalized above all else, including, unfortunately, one's faith. Therefore, the goal of this manuscript is not to settle the debate or get caught up in a polarizing argument about rights, but rather, to

articulate the complex intricacies of this issue while seeking to identify common ground solutions for the Church based in Christian ethical considerations. Identifying these common ground solutions is necessary to continue the long-standing biblical principle of unity within the Church body (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Romans 14:19, Psalms 133:1, Ephesians 4:1-6, etc.).

In an honest effort to posit such an ecumenical approach, it is first requisite to recognize the similarities between these supposed binary poles and unravel the tapestry of this false dichotomy. The secular argument presents a vision that the parties involved in this discussion are in constant contention and must be viewed as maintaining entirely mutually exclusive interests. However, upon careful examination, it becomes evident that at their core, both the pro-life and pro-choice movements at the very least share the commonality of viewing the issue of abortion through the lens of justice. In fact, many of the theological considerations on both sides of this discussion attempt to make appeals based on the principle of divine justice. Therefore, it is helpful to transcend this false dichotomy and recognize what can be mutually agreed upon by truth-seeking Christians pursuing practical solutions on a subject that is wrought with gridlock and division.

Regardless of whether one finds oneself leaning more towards the pro-choice or pro-life argument, it is important to recognize that it is just as unlikely that pro-choice Christians would want to seek abortions for mothers who do not want them any more than pro-life Christians would want mothers to die or end up homeless as a result of carrying a baby to term. Are these not mutual interests? Therefore, based on these mutual interests, the Church can collectively seek to promote a love-centric form of social justice through non-political avenues that reduce abortions by providing support for mothers through education, material assistance, social support, and addressing issues of abuse, while reinforcing a culture of life that values all parties (Tracy 2010).

These are things that both "sides" can agree upon. In having the eyes to see the moral similarities between one another, Christians can seek to collectively work towards the shared common good. The Church can serve as a light that promotes a cultural shift that values the sanctity of *all* life (e.g., Deuteronomy 30:19, Genesis 9:6, Exodus 21:22-25, Proverbs 24:11-12, Psalm 127:3-5, Exodus 23:7, Deuteronomy 5:17, Matthew 19:18, Luke 18:20, Psalm 139:13-16, etc.). As it specifically relates to this discussion, the Church can seek to do so for both the life of the mother and the baby. The answer, as cliché as it may sound, is love. Love mercy for all parties. The Church must adopt a "pro-love" theological response that transcends the false binary nature of this discussion (Whitten-Andrews 2018, 147-159).

Application for the Church

Despite the polarized gridlock that often occurs between the pro-life and pro-choice movements, the Church can collectively choose to promote a common ground approach by transcending the argument of whether or not a mother has a right to terminate the pregnancy, by instead focusing on promoting a "pro-love" solution that champions a culture of life where mothers are provided with loving support from their Christian family. Certainly, some on both sides of this discussion may not believe these measures go far enough. However, it is a step in the right direction to identify common ground actionable measures that can be mutually implemented across the ideological spectrum of the Church to improve the collective circumstances of unborn babies, mothers, and society.

Through love, the Church can be a beacon of hope that leverages this foundational biblical principle to support the following practical, love-centric measures: (1) Promoting the health and well-being of the mother, the unborn baby, and the family structure as expressed through the divine institution of marriage; (2) Supporting deprived mothers through financial, emotional, medical, spiritual, and psychological measures, while not ostracizing mothers in the church who are courageous enough to continue with their pregnancy, even in out-of-wedlock situations; (3) Advocating for a culture of life that seeks to provide alternative solutions to the termination of an unborn baby, as a living being with inherent value, while still showing the love of Christ for those who choose to proceed with abortion; and (4) Not just being pro-birth but being truly pro-life, by supporting babies after birth through assistance in the areas of adoption, foster care, and those in situations of single motherhood/fatherhood.

In an age of such uncompromising societal division promulgated by politically zealous echo chambers wrought with untethered confirmation bias, an ecumenical approach is not only an important effort to pursue but also a necessary one. Ultimately, it is only through actionable loving practices and faithful support networks, guided by the Holy Spirit, that the Church can make meaningful headway in a devolving society that has abhorrently failed to uphold the virtue of love for God, others, and self.

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Брендон Хендрикс

Јединствени теолошки приступ питању абортуса

Сажетак: Постоје два традиционална бинарна пола спектра који постоје у оквиру поларизоване секуларне расправе о питању абортуса. На једном крају налазе се заговорници става да жена има неограничено право да одлучи о прекиду трудноће. Насупрот томе, на другом крају спектра налазе се заговорници става да свако дете има основно право на живот и да држава, сходно томе, има интерес да то право заштити. Циљ овог рада јесте да покуша да испита секуларне, као и теолошке аспекте оба краја спектра у расправи о абортусу, пре него што понуди могући заједнички консензус заснован на хришћанској етици, поткрепљен библијским учењем, кроз анализу етичких разматрања аргумената за право избора, анализу етичких разматрања аргумената за живот, и, најзад, предлагање заједничке алтернативе овом спорном питању настојећи да се превазиђе бинарна природа расправе и да се пажња усмери на заједничке интересе пронађене у екуменском теолошком приступу.

Кључне речи: хришћанска биоетика, абортус, политичка теологија, практична теологија, екуменизам, религијски прагматизам